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Wrestling with violence

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To the uninitiated, *The Backyard* may seem remarkably like a film about testosterone-charged, IQ-deficient, white-trash American teens with nothing better to do with their leisure hours than set themselves alight, smash fluoro tubes over each other's heads, hurl themselves into makeshift graves filled with mousetraps, pound each other over the head with bats wrapped in barbed wire, charge at each other with flaming rubbish bin lids, and generally make out like *The Three Stooges* on steroids.

But for film maker Paul Hough, the antics of backyard wrestlers are akin to a less cultivated form of Shakespeare, a kind of beat-me-up Bard for the masses, where the audience gets more pounds of flesh than they bargained for. Wrestling, he says, ripples with drama, spectacle, and larger-than-life characters.

Those expecting a sermon on the perils of screen and actual violence should avoid Hough's first feature documentary, *The Backyard*, showing at the Melbourne International Film Festival. A disturbing, often repulsive insight into the world of backyard wrestling, the documentary steers clear of passing judgment on the young men and women who stage *Fight Club*-style matches for friends and family in the hope of one day graduating to the professional ring.

"I wanted to make a documentary that was as honest as possible," says the London-born Hough, speaking from his adopted home, the United States. "The only conscious decision I made early on was to try and show it from the backyard wrestlers' point of view. It's a world that nobody knows."

Hough discovered backyard wrestling while working for a professional wrestling television program in the US. He was given a homemade video showing the usual routines of barbed-wire beatings and wrangles in pits of broken glass.

"That's the first time that I realised that there must be all these kids out there who imitate their wrestling heroes," says Hough.

He found the Internet was choked with backyard wrestling associations, e-mailed

100 of them, and so unearthed his bizarre cast of small-town, pro-wrestling wannabes - from the strangely endearing, gap-toothed "Lizard", to the odiously homophobic and racist Chaos.

Hough travelled from the Nevada desert, to suburban Arizona, upstate New York and back to England, filming this motley crew, who provoke a myriad of reactions, from disgust to sympathy.

Their parents' take on backyard wrestling is equally fascinating to observe.

If there's one thing that riles about *The Backyard*, it's the seemingly gratuitous violence. The documentary runs for almost 90 minutes, and repeatedly shows thrashings, long after we've got the picture. "I am not a fan of violence in real life, but I am a fan of film violence," says Hough. "That's one of the major reasons I wanted to do this.

"There are two audiences for this film. One is the person who likes documentaries and the other, maybe even a bigger audience, is wrestling fans.

"Wrestling is so big all over the world that I felt it important to leave a lot of the violence in, partly due to that audience but partly because I enjoyed watching it myself." Like his documentary, Hough is brutally honest.

The Backyard screens at the Greater Union, Russell Street, tomorrow at 5.15pm, as part of the Melbourne International Film Festival. The Age is a sponsor of the festival.